

Hearst Newspapers: Congressman fights for patient safety

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By Cathleen Crowley

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- A short but fiery speech made on the floor of the House of Representatives has raised the hopes of patient safety advocates across the nation.

Rep. Bruce Braley, a second-term Democrat from Iowa, gave a last-minute speech about medical errors moments before the House voted on the health reform bill earlier this month.

"Who will speak for the patients?" Braley said in his House speech as Republicans jeered him. He quoted an Institute of Medicine report, saying, "They told us the most significant way to reduce the cost of medical malpractice is to emphasize patient safety by reducing the number of preventable medical errors."

Braley, 52, a trial lawyer who specializes in malpractice, said he had two minutes to prepare his speech. As he spoke, he was taunted by Republicans shouting "trial lawyer."

Nearly 200,000 Americans die each year from errors made during their medical care and from infections they picked up in the hospital. The lack of progress in reducing errors was the subject of a recent investigative report by Hearst Newspapers, www.deadbymistake.com.

Braley's speech impressed Helen Haskell, whose son died from a medical error.

"I was very pleased that somebody was standing up for patient safety. I thought the heckling

was unbelievable," said Haskell, of South Carolina. Her son Lewis Blackman, 15, died in 2000 after a minor surgical procedure.

Patient safety activists are cautiously optimistic that Braley may be the champion they need for their cause. "He's definitely an emerging leader and he seems to be very passionate about (patient safety)" said Lisa McGiffert, who heads Consumers Union's Safe Patient Project.

Consumers Union invited Braley to speak at its conference on patient safety in Washington, D.C., last week.

"I am so grateful to Hearst publications for their Dead by Mistake series to put the human face on the problems that bring you all here today," Braley said to the audience at the Consumers Union conference. Braley said he has passed the series to other members of Congress to bolster support for patient safety initiatives in the health reform bill.

Braley grew up on a small farm in Iowa. His father was seriously injured in a fall from a grain elevator and his mother went back to work as a teacher to support the family. His father eventually went into the insurance business, while Braley began working in his teens to help the family.

He was a successful lawyer in Waterloo, Iowa, when he ran for an open seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2006. His victory gave Democrats control of Iowa's First Congressional District for the first time since 1992.

In his short political career, Braley has rapidly climbed the ladder of leadership in the House. During his first term, he received a waiver to serve on three committees instead of two, and he was the first freshman to chair a subcommittee since the start of congressional record-keeping in 1959.

Braley founded and chairs the Populist Caucus, which is a congressional group devoted to economic issues of the middle class. He was named vice-chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the campaign arm for House Democrats. Braley leads

the committee's "Red to Blue" effort to capture Republican House seats.

During his second term, Braley was appointed to the powerful House Energy and Commerce Committee.

He is also a past president of the Iowa Trial Lawyers Association.

"When my colleagues chose to attack me by screaming "trial lawyer, trial lawyer" it wasn't affecting me in the least," Braley told advocates last week at the Consumers Union conference. "I was thinking of people that need someone to stand up for them when it comes to important issues of patient safety."

Braley said he fought for an initiative in the House health reform bill that will require Medicare to revamp its reimbursement system from a fee-for-service model to a pay-for-performance model. He believes it will reduce errors and improve quality, and he said he hopes to sponsor more legislation to improve patient safety.

"Unless medical consumers know that they have a system that is going to protect them, that is going to give them access to information to make them informed consumers," Braley said, "we will have missed a great opportunity to transform our system of health care delivery."